

## **Sophocles's OEDIPUS THE KING and Spielberg's MINORITY REPORT**

Many English teachers today pair older, canonical works with recent films that strongly allude to those earlier works—*Mrs. Dalloway* and *The Hours*, for example, or *Heart of Darkness* and *Apocalypse Now*. One pairing teachers might consider is Sophocles's *Oedipus the King* with Steven Spielberg's 2002 film *Minority Report*. While it would be an exaggeration to call *Minority Report* a futuristic retelling of the Oedipus story, the film does borrow most of the central elements of Sophocles's play. In particular, the play and the film share an emphasis on literal and symbolic vision and blindness, a plot device in which a protagonist is told he will commit a murder in the future, and a thematic concern with fate and free will.

*Minority Report* establishes its emphasis on vision and blindness within the first minute of the film. The first words we hear are "You know how blind I am without them," spoken by a character named Howard Marks about his glasses. As we hear these words, we see a scissor blade stab through the eye of a face in a magazine photo, as Marks's young son cuts out pictures for a homework project. A few seconds later, we see a closeup of an eyeball. All this is, of course, reminiscent not only of Oedipus's stabbing out his own eyes but also of the many comments about vision and blindness in Sophocles's play, such as Oedipus's comment to the plague-ravaged chorus, "How could I fail to see what longings bring you here?" (142).

As in the preceding quotation from Sophocles's play, both the film and the play employ images of vision and blindness to refer not only to physical sight but also to seeing as *understanding*. And in both works, this understanding involves past and future killings. In the film's opening minute, we see images of events that have not yet taken place, but which are being "seen" by a woman named Agatha, the person whose eye appears in the closeup. Agatha is the most gifted of three "precogs"—humans blessed and cursed with the ability to envision murders before they take place, and thus used to warn the police of the murders so they can be prevented, in a system called "Precrime." In the opening scene, Howard Marks has just "seen" that his wife is having an affair and that he is about to kill her and her lover with the scissors. But the police—led by the film's protagonist, John Anderton—prevent him from doing so. Similarly, in *Oedipus the King*, the one character who understands the truth and knows the future at the beginning of the play, Tiresias, tells Oedipus, "You're blind to the corruption of your life" (162).

In *Minority Report*, the linking of physical sight with understanding, specifically of murders, extends far beyond the opening sequence. Later, Agatha, tormented by knowing who murdered her mother and by the fact that the police have been fooled regarding the murderer's identity, repeatedly

shouts, "Can you *see*?" to John Anderton as she tries to lead him to solve the crime. And when Anderton finally recognizes that his interest in this past crime is the reason he has been set up to be arrested for a future murder, his first words are, "How could I not have seen this?"—a line reminiscent of Oedipus's statement, shortly after realizing the truth of his situation, that he had been too long "blind to the ones [he] longed to see" (218).

As presumably infallible predictors of the future, the precogs in *Minority Report* play a role analogous to that of the Oracle at Delphi in *Oedipus the King*, a similarity made explicit in the film. The precogs stay in an area referred to as "the temple," and early in the film, one character refers to the precogs collectively as "the oracle," and their handlers, the police, as "the priests."

And in both the play and the film, soon enough, the oracle tells the protagonist that he will commit murder. As a young man, Oedipus was told he would kill his father and have children by his mother (185); early in the film, Anderton is informed by the precogs that he will murder someone named Leo Crow.

Although both protagonists are informed that they will commit murders in the future, both the play and the film are set in worlds corrupted by the fact that political leaders have not been detected for murders they committed in the past. In *Oedipus the King*, Thebes suffers from a plague that can be removed only when the murderer of the previous king is discovered and punished—a murderer who turns out to be the current king, Oedipus. In *Minority Report*, Washington, DC (and thus implicitly the entire nation, especially since pre-crime is about to go national rather than being limited to DC) is corrupted by the fact that the head of precrime, Lamar Burgess, has murdered Agatha's mother to prevent losing Agatha as a precog, unbeknownst to anyone but Agatha. Thus in both works, the protagonist is doubly a detective: he must discover the truth about the oracle's prediction that he would murder someone, and he must solve the murder that corrupts the political world in which the work is set.

In addition, the protagonists of both works receive prophecies not only from seemingly divine oracles, but also from blind mortals. Tiresias declares that Oedipus is himself the murderer of the previous king (159) and then adds, correctly, that by the day's end Oedipus will be reduced to a blind beggar and will know he is both son and husband to his wife, both brother and father to his children (164). In *Minority Report*, a sleazy character with grotesque, hollow sockets where his eyes should be sells John Anderton a drug he calls "Clarity" and then says, "In the country of the blind, the one-eyed man is king"—a statement that proves prophetic later in the film when Anderton, possessing only one of his original eyes, is able to outwit others who are "blind" to the true situation regarding the murder that Burgess committed.

The most obvious, and obviously sight-related, parallel between the two works is the fact that both protagonists voluntarily lose their eyes. And in each

case, this loss of eyes largely coincides with the protagonist's ability to "see" in a deeper sense. Once Oedipus realizes that he did indeed murder his father and marry his mother—once he sees the truth—he stabs out his eyes. In the futuristic world of *Minority Report*, omnipresent eye scans make hiding virtually impossible, and so Anderton, once he is wanted for the future murder of Leo Crow, has his eyes removed and exchanged for a different pair to evade detection, having been advised by one of the inventors of precrime that "Sometimes in order to see the light you have to risk the dark." It is only through this swapping of eyes—and through retaining at least one of his original eyes in a plastic bag, for use in eye scans for security clearance—that he is eventually able to "see the light" and solve both mysteries: why he is accused of murdering Leo Crow and how Lamar Burgess murdered Agatha's mother.

When we reach the protagonist's encounter with the person he was predicted to kill, both the play and the film are somewhat ambiguous on the issue of fate versus free will. Oedipus does murder his father (and marry his mother), as the oracle had said he would, despite every effort he makes to avoid fulfilling this fate. Indeed, his efforts to avoid his fate lead him to precisely the spot where he must be to fulfill it. But critics have long emphasized that the character traits Oedipus displays in the play's present are precisely the ones that would have naturally led him to react as he did when he encountered his father (Knox and Thalmann 598). They have also emphasized that the gods can *know* the future without *causing* it (Dodds 23). Thus, the killing seems both an expression of inexorable fate *and* the natural expression of Oedipus's character. Similarly, when John Anderton finally confronts Leo Crow, he tries to arrest Crow rather than kill him—but Crow, determined to die, grabs for Anderton's gun and is eventually fatally shot, with the film ambiguous as to whether Anderton (accidentally) or Crow (intentionally) pulls the trigger. So, Anderton does not attempt to murder Crow yet plays a role in the man's death. Moreover, the film paradoxically insists that although the future can be accurately predicted, those who *know* their future have the power to *change* it. Thus, both works concede considerable power to fate but also leave room for free will.

*Minority Report* alludes to *Oedipus the King* in smaller ways as well. Early on, a character named Danny Witwer repeatedly mentions finding a "flaw" in Anderton—surely an echo of the concept of "tragic flaw" in characters like Oedipus. Later, as curiosity leads Anderton toward confronting Leo Crow, whom he has never met but whom he is "supposed" to murder, Agatha warns him, "You have a choice. Walk away. Now." But he refuses, saying, "I can't. I have to know. I have to find out what happened to my life." This exchange is strikingly similar to one in which Jocasta asks Oedipus to "call off this search" into his own identity and Oedipus refuses, saying, "I must know it all, must see the truth at last" (203–04).

In addition, Anderton and his wife, like Jocasta and her first husband, are haunted by the presumed but not certain death of their son. Late in the film, Anderton states that he often wonders “if I would recognize [my son] if I saw him on the street”—a reminder that when Oedipus’s father met Oedipus, the son that he thought was dead, the two of them (fatally) did not recognize each other (186).

Officially, *Minority Report* is based on a short story of the same name by Philip K. Dick, and at least some of the plot (although none of the material about vision and blindness) is indeed adapted from that story. But the film is at least as indebted to *Oedipus the King*. The similarities between Sophocles’s play and Spielberg’s film are so pervasive that a blind man could see them.

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#### De Troyes’s ÉREC ET ÉNIDE

In *Érec et Énide* (ca. 1170), Chrétien de Troyes narrates the love story of two youthful protagonists. The first part of the book, or “li premerains vers,”<sup>1</sup> focuses on the couple’s initial encounter and marriage. Not surprisingly, the narrative is marked by the theme of *conjointure* (“conjoining” [line 14]) announced in the prologue.<sup>2</sup> Érec and Énide’s betrothal and wedding are accompanied poetically, in the text, by the coming together of two closely intertwined storybook realms: the kingdom of King Arthur and the unnamed place I will refer to as “Énide’s world.”

At the beginning of the romance, Arthur announces his intention to revive his ancestor’s “custom” (*costume*) of the hunt for the White Stag.<sup>3</sup> He who proves himself the most valorous by bagging the beast will earn the right to recognize the fairest lady at court with a kiss. Gauvain urges Arthur to reconsider, fearing that such a competition will only end in an unavoidable fight